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ABSTRACT

The development of a course in English letter-writing for workers in the accounts-payable departments of Papua New Guinea businesses is described. The needs assessment involved extensive discussion with company staff and their supervisors, collection and analysis of letters recently produced by that staff, and development of a diagnostic test. It was decided that the course would focus on the purpose or function of the communication as interaction rather than the types of text. Students were encouraged to treat correspondence as a form of conversation, and to consider the reader's likely response to each sentence in the text, emphasizing their own role in promoting cooperation between writer and reader. Further, students were taught the use of politeness strategies, particularly indirect ones, to accomplish the text's objective. The texts of a number of letters are presented and analyzed for their pragmatic linguistic features. A brief bibliography and a classroom pragmatics exercise are also included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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TEACHING THE PRAGMATICS OF ACCOUNTS-PAYABLE LETTERS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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TEACHING THE PRAGMATICS OF ACCOUNTS-PAYABLE LETTERS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

James Moody

Background: Needs Assessment and Course Design

The Department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Technology in Lae, Papua New Guinea, has in the last few years organized and conducted several short courses in language and communication skills for employees of commercial companies and organizations in the local community. In February 1993, this Department was approached by the Training and Safety Officer at the local headquarters of C.I.G. (PNG) Ltd. This company is engaged in the production and distribution of gas cylinders. The management was concerned with the need for staff to project a positive image of the company and requested the LCS Department to conduct a short course in English Language. Initially the purpose of this proposed course was seen to be to help employees eliminate unnecessary words and come to the point in oral and written communication. However, in subsequent discussions with the C.I.G. management, it became apparent that what the company really wanted was for their employees to become more self-confident in their work and to develop their abilities to use English appropriately in the particular tasks they were required to perform.

Thus, the first step in assessing the needs of our prospective students was to try to determine as precisely as possible what the management expected them to do and how they might fail to fulfill these expectations. This was by no means as straightforward a task as it may seem. In Papua New Guinea, commercial companies are obliged under law to use some of their income to provide further training for employees. There is a danger that our short courses may be used as a convenient means of meeting what can be considered an onerous obligation: staff are simply sent to improve their English and the company itself takes little further interest. Managers and training officers of commercial concerns are not, of course, linguists or language teachers. They might feel that "something is wrong" or that "communication could be better". But their assessment may go no deeper than this unless they are questioned, encouraged and provoked to focus on particular areas requiring attention. This initial prodding (and even pestering) of the client is essential to the process of designing an effective course. In the present case it paid off. As discussion proceeded over several sessions, the C.I.G. officials proved to be concerned, intelligent and sensitive, so that in the end they were able to articulate and specify their re-

quirements.

It was agreed that the course would consist of twelve two-hour sessions, meeting three times a week in April and May. It should cover such areas as letter, memo and fax writing; telephone communication; completing forms; and oral presentations. There would be eight students, all from the Accounts Department. They all had at least several years' experience in the company, and their educational qualifications ranged from Junior Secondary Certification to University Degree. Subsequent discussions with some of the students prior to the course were very enlightening. They stressed that they needed to be able to interpret and convey information accurately and to "translate" information from figures into words. They also recognized the need to be able to use appropriate language and to communicate in different ways, depending on the situation. It was further agreed to conduct classes on an in-service basis after working hours (from four to six in the afternoons) in a fully-equipped classroom on the company premises. Both these decisions were made on pedagogical grounds. A number of two-hour sessions spread over several weeks was preferable to one or two all-day sessions (which had been the format followed by some of our previous short courses in business communication), since the former would provide time for students to think about what had been discussed and for assignments to be written and marked. To conduct classes on the students' home-ground would help provide a degree of self-confidence as well as encourage them to see the course as integral to their work.

One practical way in which cooperation from management was forthcoming was in their willingness to provide samples of written texts (letters, forms, memos, etc.) actually used in their company. Most of these had been written by the members of the Accounts Department who would be attending the course. In addition, students also cooperated by providing specimen texts they had produced as part of their daily work. Prior to the commencement of the course, a diagnostic test was given, requiring students to write a letter and a memo based on a situation and information supplied. From this test we were able to judge their abilities to use appropriate language and to collect, organize and present information. Eventually several of the texts from both these sources were used as teaching materials. In this way the course concentrated upon the specific tasks students had actually been required to perform.

A major advantage of a course designed specifically for a group of employees in a single section of a company is that their own writing can form the basis for teaching materials. The teaching of communication skills is nothing if not contingent, and nothing could be more contingent than to base teaching on what students have been doing immediately prior to their entering the classroom. This approach certainly captured their attention and doubtlessly increased their motivation. Although of obvious pedagogical advantage, the use of such materials has one potential drawback: that students who have written the texts used might be embarrassed for their work to be seen and discussed by

others. One way around this problem is for the teacher to make a careful selection, to try to ensure that insofar as possible for every likely negative observation made about the deficiencies in a text there is a corresponding positive feature. Another solution might be to omit the names of writers in the duplicated handouts and/or overhead transparencies, but this seems a bit coy and artificial. In the present case, the fact that students knew who had written these texts did not appear to matter: they were all mature, experienced and in any case already familiar with each others' writing.

The needs assessment for this course, then, consisted of three interrelated exercises: (1) extensive discussions with both the C.I.G. management (particularly the General Manager, the Training and Safety Officer and the Personnel Officer) and the members of staff who would be students; (2) collection and analysis of written texts which had been recently produced by students in their jobs; (3) the scripts of a diagnostic test. From information provided by these means, a syllabus was drawn up and approved. The stated purpose was "... to develop the abilities of senior staff at C.I.G. PNG Ltd. in Lae to communicate effectively in the work place, so that they can work more efficiently and project a positive image of the company". The method of instruction would "... concentrate on practical needs of students, using whenever possible materials, situations and problems which actually confront them in their work". Students would be "expected to carry out a series of communicative tasks which will be assessed, discussed and analyzed by the class". Of particular importance to present paper, two of the four general objectives were that the course should enable students to "gain an awareness of why we communicate, how we communicate and what can go wrong in communication" and to "understand what is required in different types of business writing and to practise writing some of these".

Four members of the Unitech LCS Department conducted this course, each one responsible for different aspects of spoken and written communication. The present writer's assignment was to conduct classes on communication in general and on effective business writing in particular. What follows is an account of how this teaching assignment was carried out. From the outset it was intended that the course be practically oriented. The term <u>practical</u> in the teaching of language and communication skills often carries with it connotations of being mechanical, boring and/or intellectually barren. But it is possible to use the immediate task, problem, or text as a springboard for considering issues of more general significance and application. Partly for such reasons, the work in this section of the course was literally planned (and sometimes left unplanned) from class to class: what was perceived to be a dilemma at the conclusion of one session became the starting point for the next one. Thus, the course was very much the creation of the students themselves-- or, perhaps, more accurately, of the interaction between students and teacher. It was the students' questions and concerns which determined what was done. Another principle followed was to explore whatever issues were raised (even-- especially-- when apparently unpromis-

ing or superficial) and to pursue their implications and ramifications as far as time would permit.

The Groundwork: Establishing Communication as Interactive Cooperation

In the initial planning for this course, as doubtlessly is the case with other comparable courses, the topics in the syllabus were selected according to text types: letters, memos, faxes, oral reports, etc. It was clear from the needs assessment exercise that a large proportion of the written correspondence produced by members of this particular class involved making requests to the company's clients to pay their outstanding debts. Thus it seemed advisable, given the short time allowed, to concentrate not on letter writing in general but on this basic communicative/situational type of writing which, if carried out successfully, would help project a positive image of the company, one of the main purposes the course was meant to serve. Two observations can be made about this decision. First, it would not have been possible to teach in this way if the class had been less homogeneous. Secondly, it changed the focus of the course somewhat-- at least initially-- from types of texts to purpose or function of communication.

As a starting point students were encouraged to see that writing a text, and particularly writing an accounts-payable letter, is, indeed, a communicative act, one that the Sender performs in order to achieve a function or purpose for a Receiver in the context a community. (These ideas were discussed in terms of a diagram of a model for communication, given as Appendix A.) The negotiation of meaning through a process of interaction is no less essential for written than for oral communication. A fundamental task in teaching all types of writing is to convince students of the validity of Levinson's (1983: 43) claim about the centrality of face-to-face interaction as the "functional matrix for language use," and to encourage them to adopt it as a strategy for both effective reading and writing. In reading, for instance, I need to ask whether I am the reader the writer intended. (How many poor results in university can be attributed to students trying to read texts too advanced for them?) And in writing, it is necessary to have an image of the likely expectations, knowledge and assumptions of the intended reader. In teaching letter writing, this skill should be easier to develop than in more "general" types of writing such as essays, for instance, where the identity of the intended reader can be far from clear. (See Potts, 1985.) But in contrast to face-to-face oral communication, all effective writing (and reading) requires a leap of the imagination to reconstruct (or deconstruct) this interactive process.

There have been several attempts to analyze interaction in terms of a Cooperative Principle in communication. The intention of the Sender as perceived by the Receiver is the motivating factor in keeping communication going. This is the basis of the

classical Pragmatics of Searle (1969, 1975) and Grice (1975), which are founded in conversational practice. Grice's well-known principle is: "make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange in which you are engaged". This generalization is broken down into four conversational maxims (adapted from Grice, 1975):

I. Quality: say what you believe to be true: do not say what you believe to be false and do not say that for which you lack sufficient evidence

II. Quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange; do not make your contribution more informative than required

III. Relevance: be relevant

IV. Manner: be clear, by avoiding obscurity and ambiguity and by being brief and orderly

What is important is not that speakers normally follow these maxims when speaking (they often do not, according to Brown and Levinson, 1987: 95). But, rather, that listeners comprehend by expecting them to be followed, through determining whether or not they are followed and by working out why or why not they are, in light of prior knowledge and the context of situation. When a listener perceives that a maxim is not being upheld, or when there is a conflict of maxims, an implicature (Grice, 1975) may be deemed to have occurred. It is only this assumption that permits communication to continue. At a further remove the principle holds for writing as much as for oral communication. If the sender's intentions are unclear or if s/he is unable to express them effectively by executing the maxims (or implicatures) in the language used, there is a breakdown in communication (incomprehension or misunderstanding).

Widdowson (1979: 175 ff) provides his own interpretation of the Cooperative Principle in written language. He deconstructs a written text in terms of an imagined conversation between the reader and the writer, taking place in the mind of the writer. The responses and questions of the reader at each stage of the discourse (or, more accurately, the writer's anticipation of them) influence the writer's choice of what to say next. As an exercise in showing how effective writing follows the Cooperative Principle, it seemed appropriate to adopt Widdowson's procedure to one of the accounts-payable letters written by the students. Widdowson stresses the content of the questions being asked, but since relations between Sender and Receiver can be as important as the overt literal meaning (at least in this kind of letter), students were asked also to indicate the reaction the Receiver was likely to have at each stage to both the content and intention of what the Sender had just said. The following letter underwent this deconstruction process in class discussion.

(Numbers of sentences have been added here and in all texts reproduced in this paper.)

Text A

> (1) Please find attach Debtors Reconciliation relating to your Mt Hagen account. (2) You will note that the following invoices dating back to 1988/89 is still appearing on the existing account.
>
> (3) However, I would appreciate you supplying any related payments against this respective invoice which we may have disregarded.
>
> (4) Your earliest response would be highly appreciated.

The following list indicates some imagined questions and statements to which the sentences written in the letter could be responses:

Imagined Questions/Statements:	Answers/Responses:
What is attached to the letter?	Sentence (1)
Why are you sending me these items?	Sentence (2)
But we have paid some of these invoices.	Sentence (3)
When do you want me to respond?	Sentence (4)

The exact wordings in the left-hand column were debated by the class, but there was agreement that it was possible to imagine some such stimulus to which sentences of the text indicated in the right-hand column were responding. Three additional points followed on from this one: that the writer was aware at each stage of the possible reactions of the reader, that the writer was engaged in negotiation with the reader on the basis of these possible reactions and that the letter has an overall logical structure. The orderly progression of the reconstructed "conversation" in this text not only marks it as following abstract principles of logic. Just as important is the fact that in doing so it shows consideration for the likely reactions of the reader. In fact, we could say that in pragmatic terms being logical is a way of achieving cooperation between Sender and Receiver. The class considered this to be a successful accounts-payable letter because it was a "thoughtful" one, in two senses of the term: it makes rational sense, and it shows respect for the reader and sensitivity to his/her possible problems in interpretation.

As a contrast, it was interesting to consider what was *a priori* taken by the class to be an unsuccessful letter, subject it to a similar analysis and try to determine the reasons for its failure to follow the Cooperative Principle.

Text B

(5) We wish to bring to your attention that we are now treating this as our last resort to cover outstanding debt.

(6) Several attempts has been made in regards to above but without success.

(7) Failure to comply with the above instruction would result in necessary action taken to recover costs.

(8) Enclose please find herewith copies for your information, being your rentals. (9) Total owing K84.00.

(10) Please forward payment to the address above or pay at our office in Lorengau.

It is considerably more difficult to discover the other side of the "conversation" in Text B than it is in Text A. It is possible that (5) could be the answer to a general question such as, "What is the purpose of this letter?" and (6) to one like "Have you attempted to recover the debt from me?". But how likely would the receiver be to ask either of these questions, and how does the first question lead on to the second? Since no instruction has been mentioned, the receiver would also be unlikely to ask, "What will happen if I fail to comply with your instruction?" to produce the response in (7). The imagined question which provokes (8) and (9)-- "What are you referring to?"-- should not need to be asked at this stage in the text. And "How am I to pay?", which is a possible question provoking (10) would also be illogical in this sequence. Essential information is not provided when required. References are made to things the writer knows but of which the reader remains unaware: "this" in (5); "above" in (6), "above instruction" in (7). Initially, it was intuitively felt by the class that Text B is both less cooperative and less clear than Text A. By deconstructing it in such a way, evidence was provided to support this view: the sentences appear to make "unreasonable" demands (again, in both logical and pragmatic senses) on the reader because they do not cohere together in a logical sequence and thus do not evince a spirit of cooperation.

As a result of these exercises, students began to think about the functions being performed by individual sentences and their role in promoting cooperation between writer and reader. One idea emerging from class discussion was that in order to maintain cooperation, it is necessary to be polite. Politeness is of course an essential part of cooperation. It has a general social, psychological and philosophical basis in the need for cooperation and cohesion in all social activity, including communication. The class felt that it is particularly important to be polite in an accounts-payable letter. Writers of such letters are by definition bringing unwelcomed and unpleasant news. Moreover,

they are requesting the reader to do something disagreeable: to part with her/his (company's) money. Considerable skill needs to be exercised in order to mitigate the negative aspects of such a request in order to avoid offending or alienating the reader. If a letter made an impolite impression, the result might well be a failure by the reader to comply with the request made. The intuitive impression of the class about what makes a "good" (successful) and a "bad" (unsuccessful) letter, is grounds for claiming that the reader expects an accounts-payable letter to be polite.

In addition to assuming that the Sender is following the Cooperative Principle, Receivers are also able to comprehend messages through their preexisting knowledge, attitudes, expectations, which they hold by virtue of their membership in a discourse community. Swales (1990: 24ff) has characterized this as a group of people (typically professionals) with a shared expertise in a field, who have and use common genres and mechanisms of intercommunication. One such genre for the discourse community of accountants is the accounts-payable letter. The class discussed politeness as an appropriate and conventional strategy for this type of text and whether it is a required or an optional feature. The circumstances surrounding a communicative event (receiving a letter from a company to which you know you own money) will activate for members of the discourse community (accountants) a mental frame or schema (for an accounts-payable letter). Brown and Yule (1983: 247ff) distinguish between the strong (deterministic) and weak views of schemata: the former in our case would mean that the reader fails to recognize a text as an accounts-payable letter unless it is polite; the latter that s/he expects it to be polite (and is surprised-- or offended-- when it is not).

This distinction is similar to the one Searle (1969) draws between constitutive and regulative rules. The class considered politeness to be regulative and expected, rather than a defining and necessary feature of accounts-payable letters. But one could present a case from the company's point of view that politeness is constitutive. Both its public image and its financial liquidity may depend upon the success of such letters. To write them successfully, the students came to the conclusion that they needed to possess and to be able to manipulate the English language so as to achieve appropriate degrees of politeness. To fail to do would produce undesirable results because it would show C.I.G.'s employees to be ignorant of or opposed to the accepted conventions of the business community. Thus, developing politeness strategies became the next stage in class work.

Achieving Politeness through Indirection

Why doesn't human communication always conform to the "rational efficiency" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 95) of Grice's maxims? One way of answering this question is to posit two interpretations of the Cooperative Principle: one is literal, semantic, rational; the other is personal, pragmatic, intuitive. To

make your contribution such as is required for your purpose and to give the right amount of relevant information clearly, seems an eminently rational way of communicating. But it would obviously be disastrous to follow these maxims slavishly in accounts-payable letters; for instance in this made-up example:

> (11) I request you to pay your overdue debt of K 85. (12) If you do not pay me immediately I shall sue you.

As a text (11) and (12) are certainly clear, economical, direct, purposeful, etc. But cooperation also involves other considerations besides Grice's maxims, including what we intuitively refer to as politeness. As the students were quick to point out, (11) and (12) are not polite, and no accountant would be likely to write them in a real letter. The problem is, of course, that (11) and (12), judging them in regard to most real communicative situations, go too far in literally and directly upholding all of Grice's maxims. Most (or at least a great deal of) human communication is <u>indirect</u>, largely because we want it to be polite in the second sense of the Cooperative Principle.

Considerations such as these have led Brown and Levinson (pp. 62ff) to the conclusion that Grice's Cooperative Principle is incomplete because it does not take into account the centrality of politeness in human communication. They see politeness in terms of a speaker's giving attention to <u>face</u>, both <u>negative face</u> (the desire that one's actions be unimpeded by others) and <u>positive face</u> (the desire that one's wants be desirable to others). Human communication involves potentially <u>face threatening acts</u>, to either the Sender or the Receiver. Any careful Sender will want to employ certain strategies of language use to minimize such threats and thus will take into account the relative weightings of three wants: (a) to communicate the content/information of what is said; (b) to be efficient or urgent; (c) to maintain the Receiver's face.

Successful communication usually involves trying to maintain a balance or, if that fails, making a trade-off among these wants. When want (c) is greater than (b)-- which is in most cases-- the Sender will minimize the threat of the face threatening act by means of a number of possible <u>politeness strategies</u>. Brown and Levinson set up a hierarchy of such strategies for achieving both positive and negative politeness. <u>Positive politeness</u> is oriented towards satisfying the Receiver's need for approval and belonging, while <u>negative politeness</u> is oriented towards minimizing the imposition of a face-threatening act upon the Receiver (see also Scarcella and Brunak, 1981: 59).

For example, one way of achieving negative politeness is through the sub-maxim "Be direct" (come to the point, don't waste Receiver's time, etc.), but this conflicts with another sub-maxim "Don't coerce Receiver" (give Receiver the option of not doing what is requested). In the case of accounts-payable letters, a (possible) command such as:

(13) Pay your bill at once!

is certainly direct, but it is coercive in the extreme. Thus, a mechanism of indirectness develops as a compromise means of satisfying both these sub-maxims (Brown and Levinson, pp. 130ff). A more indirect (and more polite) way of achieving the same directive is:

(14) Would you please mind paying your bill as soon as possible?

Such indirect speech acts (Searle, 1979) are one means-- perhaps the major means-- of asserting politeness. Indeed, it has been suggested by some commentators (see, e.g., Levinson, 1983: 274 and Leech, 1983: 79) that politeness is the underlying motivating factor for indirectness in language use generally and the explanation for why Senders chose complexity over simplicity.

To introduce students to the basic notion that language in use has indirect functions in addition to direct literal meaning (and that the two do not always coincide), a simple exercise was given asking them to match functions with possible statements from made-up examples of business communication. (See Appendix B.) This was followed by a detailed consideration of a number of authentic sentences taken from the letters they had themselves produced. These sentences were discussed with regard to their degree of indirectness, and students were encouraged to think about the relationship between indirectness and politeness. Following are the examples considered, together with some points that emerged in discussion.

(15) Please pay direct to CIG P/L, P.O. Box 93, Lae.
(16) Kindly, check your records and effect payment immediately.

These two sentences are probably the most direct of those considered; they are in the imperative mood, which is the illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) associated with direct directives (Searle, 1979). They are only one step removed from the most direct type of speech act of all, a performative: e.g., "I request you to pay...." The verbs in these sentences unambiguously name the acts the Receiver is requested to perform. However, the mitigators please and kindly supply a degree of indirectness and make them more polite than they would otherwise be.

(17) You are further advised that gas cylinders remain the property of CIG and are supplied to customers on loan.

This sentence is a performative since its main verb names the function being performed (advising). But even in this direct speech act there is an element of indirectness (and hence of politeness) because the information given is incomplete. The choice of the passive voice permits the sender to delete the agent (the performer of the action of advising) and thereby avoid naming the Sender (compare the direct performative "I [hereby] advise you that..."), while at the same time placing the reader

(you) in initial thematic position. Brown and Levinson (p. 194) claim that passivization plus deletion is an excellent means of avoiding reference to the persons involved in face threatening acts, and therefore it is a useful strategy for asserting negative politeness. By placing the Receiver in initial position, this strategy can simultaneously assert positive politeness by intensifying the Sender's interest in the Receiver.

(18) You are kindly asked to settle payment for this account before end of month as it is well overdue.

Like (15) and (16), this is a directive, but it is less direct than they are because it has the form of an assertive, a statement. Compare the direct (and much less polite) possible directive, "Settle payment for this account...." (18) is also, like (17), a performative in that it names the act of asking, but its directness is mitigated because through passivization the agent is deleted and the source of the "asking" not named. And, as in (17), thematization maintains the Receiver's face.

(19) We wish to bring to your attention that we are now treating this as our last resort to cover outstanding debts.
(20) We wish to advise you that your account is now suspended - STOP SUPPLY.

The assertions (to bring to your attention, to advise you) in (19) and (20) are made indirect by what has been called hedging (Fraser, 1975): the inclusion of the modal "wish" communicates literally that the sender has the desire to make an assertion but does not state explicitly that the assertion is being made. Scarcella and Brunak (1981: 61) explain hedging as using linguistic features to mark the absence of certainly. In fact the reader of (19) and (20) is left in no doubt that s/he is being advised/having it brought to his/her attention. But through the absence of literal certainty politeness is asserted. These sentences also make use of impersonalization, which Brown and Levinson (pp. 190ff) classify as another strategy for achieving negative politeness, the Sender's desire not to impinge on the Receiver. In this case, the Sender is disassociated from the infringement through the pluralization of the pronoun: by selecting "we" instead of "I", the writer distances himself personally from the unpleasantness which is dispersed among the others he represents.

(21) Please find invoice # 48735 for K49.00, being twelve months rent with statement of account of K49.00.

This is similar to (15) and (16) insofar as it is a direct request to the reader. However, it is not directly requesting payment of the bill directly, but literally it is directing the reader to (finding) the bill. Such understatement or litotes (Leech, 1983: 147f) makes a Gricean implicature and prompts the

reader to figure out a reason why s/he should be directed to "find" the invoice at all. This is not a difficult process since the purpose of invoices is, after all, to request payment due. But this strategy permits the writer to make the request indirectly and hence politely.

(22) Your account is now subject to suspension.
(23) In view of the credit control policies of this company, all accounts MUST be settled within 30 days.

The primary (indirect) illocutionary force of these sentences is to warn the reader, although their secondary (direct, literal) function is to inform. (See Searle, 1979, for this terminology.) Both of them omit information which, if included, would render them impolite. In (22) the use of the expression "subject to" implies that the sender has chosen not to take the option of suspending the account, thereby asserting positive politeness (valuing the wants of the Receiver). But there is also an implication in (22) that "we shall suspend it if you do not pay it", which is obscured by the nominalization of "suspend" into "suspension". In (23) the implication is "you have not settled yours". In both cases the reader reasons out the pragmatic meaning in terms of Grice's maxim of Quantity through a process of wondering why the writer supplies such information at all: only a reader whom the writer thought was unaware of what is being said would need to be told; the reader thinks that the writer thinks the reader belongs in this category; the reason the writer thinks this, the reader concludes, is because the reader has not paid (has forgot about) the outstanding debt. Sentence (23) also contains a high degree of impersonalization: first and second person pronouns are avoided altogether, and policies are attributed to the institution ("this company") rather than to the individuals who actually make and enforce them. A degree of negative politeness is therefore achieved by making it appear that the Sender has no control over the threat to the Receiver's face.

The classroom discussion of the functions of these individual sentences was useful, not least because of the questions it left unanswered. Brown and Levinson as well as Leech suggest an equation between politeness and indirectness: the more indirect the illocutionary force, the more polite a sentence is. This is obviously true in a simplistic sense when we use the made-up constructs of linguists. Thus, the following sequence is progressively more polite.

(24) Pay your debt.
(25) Please pay your debt.
(26) I must ask you to pay your debt.
(27) We regret that we must ask you to pay your debt.
(28) The company regrets to inform you that your debt is outstanding.

A number of factors are involved here in addition to those discussed in Searle's (1979) classic exposition of indirect speech acts. In Brown and Levinson's topology, indirect speech acts as

such are considered as only one type of negative politeness. However, it seems to me that such features as passivization, nominalization and impersonalization are also aspects of "indirectness" in a more general sense, and they were considered in class discussion as ways of achieving politeness through indirection.

At first an attempt was made to classify sentences (15) - (23) according to their degree of indirectness and, hence, of politeness. However, as analysis proceeded this became problematic. When confronted with texts used in actual communication, it is difficult to make such a straightforward classification. There seem to be at least three reasons for this. First, unlike (24) - (28), each sentence in (15) - (25) concerns a unique situation with its own complex of facts and contingencies, and it was sometimes difficult to consider these given factors as "equivalent" for the sake of comparing the speech acts concerned. Second is a criticism often made of the classical Speech Act Theory of Searle: that in actual use a given sentence is likely to have a number of different functions (or illocutionary forces) rather than a single one (see Leech, 1983: 225). Third is the possibility, suggested for instance by Ferrara (1980), that it is impossible to identify the function performed by any sentence by removing it from the text in which it is used; it needs to be considered in the context of what comes before and after. (This last point will be considered more fully in the next section.)

However, one general observation about the relationship between politeness and indirectness which does appear to hold for (15) - (23) is Brown and Levinson's (1983: 93f) claim that the greater the <u>effort</u> the speaker expends in being indirect, the more s/he communicates a sincere desire to be polite. This could stand as a general gauge of politeness in business correspondence. The complex transformations involved in manipulating the English language in (22) and (25)-- including the various circumlocutions noted in the discussion-- probably cause us to regard it as more polite than, say, (16) or (17). The implication of this pragmatic observation for language teaching is clear: that the greater the students' abilities and skills are developed to enable them to use a number of different strategies to achieve indirection, the greater the likelihood that they will be interpreted as being polite.

The purpose of this classroom exercise was not merely to analyse within an abstract intellectual framework what students were already able to do intuitively. Such work has its uses in language teaching; it can provide a degree of self-confidence by letting the students know that they are on the right track but need to develop (rather than acquire) certain skills. The main reason for undertaking this exercise, though, was to give them an opportunity to consider whether or not they, as writers of these sentences, actually intended the degree and type of indirectness and politeness communicated. By having their letters read and reacted to by other members of the class, they were able to enter into a dialogue with their "readers" (albeit not the "real" ones)

and receive the all important reaction and feedback to what they had written. Without this continuing process, communication ceases to be an interactive negotiation of meaning.

Leech's (1983) analysis of politeness develops Grice's framework and is similar in conception and detail to Brown and Levinson's. Leech (132ff) adds a Politeness Principle to complement Grice's Cooperative Principle. Negative politeness consists in minimizing the impoliteness of negative illocutions, and positive politeness of maximizing the politeness of polite illocutions. Leech's Politeness Maxims are set out in terms of this positive-negative polarity:

I. Tact
   (a) Minimize cost to other
   (b) Maximize benefit to other

II. Generosity
   (a) Minimize benefit to self
   (b) Maximize cost to self

III. Approbation
   (a) Minimize dispraise of other
   (b) Maximize dispraise of self

IV. Modesty
   (a) Minimize praise of self
   (b) Maximize dispraise of self

V. Agreement
   (a) Minimize disagreement between self and other
   (b) Maximize agreement between self and other

VI. Sympathy
   (a) Minimize antipathy between self and other
   (b) Maximize sympathy between self and other

The use of indirectness in achieving politeness involves a trade-off between competing maxims from both Grice's and Leech's lists. (Leech sees the maxims of the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle as complementary options in a single operational framework.) In real communication, it often happens that two (or more) maxims cannot be upheld simultaneously. When this happens, the Sender opts for one maxim over another and thus makes an implicature. (The maxim which is not upheld is said to be flouted.) The Receiver who is pragmatically competent makes a series of consecutive rational deductions which involve (i) rejection of the face-value interpretation as inconsistent with the Cooperative Principle; (ii) search for a new interpretation consistent with the Cooperative Principle; (iii) finding a new interpretation and checking that it is consistent with the Cooperative Principle (Leech, 1983: 31).

In terms of this framework, the C.I.G. accounts-payable letters showed a significant conflict between Grice's maxim of

Manner (be clear) and several maxims of Leech's Politeness Principle. Perhaps the main pragmatic task the writers of such letters face is how to be clear, direct, even insistent in their demand for payment, yet at the same time not alienate or antagonize the reader. The solution to this problem most commonly involves a flouting of the maxim of Manner of the Cooperative Principle (be clear) in order to uphold one of the maxims of the Politeness Principle. An attempt to accomplish this process can be observed in this sentence from Text B:

(7) Failure to comply with the above instructions would result in necessary action taken to recover costs.

The maxim of Manner could be upheld by substituting "will" for "would" here, but the resulting (made-up) sentence is less polite:

(29) Failure to comply with the above instructions will result in necessary action taken to recover costs.

The choice of "would" casts doubt on the certainty of the future action even if the payment is not made. This is clearly not the intended meaning of the writer. The reader is aware (or should be) that if the bill is not paid, then the company will certainly (and unconditionally) take action. However, the writer mitigates the unpleasantness of such a bald statement by using the modal "would", which does <u>not</u> commit the company to taking action. This choice could be explained by the writer's desire to uphold the Tact maxim (b) and maximize the benefit to the receiver-- or perhaps by the Sympathy maxim (b) by maximizing the sympathy between them. The reader, seeing that there is a conflict between what is said literally and what is meant, is expected to look for an implicature and to decide that the writer wants to be polite, even if this makes the statement unclear and ambiguous.

The grammar of this sentence is questionable (to the intuition of a native speaker): "would" implies a condition which is not stated, though it can, perhaps, be recovered from the first part of the sentence: transformed from "if you fail to comply...." This communicates a kind of redundancy, though, which may not be strictly correct. My interpretation of (7) is that the sentence has been written by someone who is manipulating the maxims of the Cooperative and Politeness Principles competently by making an implicature, but who is less able to achieve this pragmatic strategy within the rules of English grammar. Teachers should recognize and give credit when students are trying to put into effect pragmatic principles even when the grammar is not secure-- and when, as in this case, they may be bending the rules of English <u>in order</u> to achieve a pragmatic end. Teachers can build upon this type of skill and offer encouragement: "You understand the principle and the stragegy but have problems carrying them out in English."

Politeness as an Aspect of Discourse Structure

Discussing individual sentences in class was a useful way to show students that politeness is an aspect of the function of language (in contrast to its literal meaning) and was suggestive about the relationship between indirectness and politeness. However, this approach failed to explain how a text such as the following letter functions:

Text C

> (30) We note with concern that you have not attended to our previous correspondences in which we forwarded to you details of the outstanding invoices as requested by yourselves. (31) As a result, your account has exceeded the credit terms of this company. (32) According to our records, the status of your account is as follows:
>
> | 30 DAYS | 60 DAYS | 90 DAYS | 120 DAYS & PRIOR |
> |---|---|---|---|
> | 3618.57 | 1880.71 | 55.00 | 2651.22 |
>
> (33) We therefore, with the view of bringing this account completely up-to-date, enclose full details of the outstanding invoices together with a full reconciliation of the account.
>
> (34) We trust that this occasion will enable prompt response and positive commitments by yourselves in this matter.

In this text there is no single sentence that constitutes a speech act with the illocutionary force of requesting payment. (34) may be an exception, but it is so hedged and indirect that it almost seems as if the writer is doing the reader a favour by providing the receiver's company with an opportunity to show their positive commitment. Yet there can be little doubt that the text functions globally as a request for payment. In fact it is a masterpiece of indirection and was considered by the class as one of the most polite of all the letters. The pragmatics of politeness in Text C, is not a matter of the functions of individual sentences. Indeed, we are able to say that (33) and (34), function indirectly as requests only because we have already formed an impression from what has been said in (30) - (32) that this is in fact an accounts-payable letter.

This procedure is known in Discourse Analysis as top-down processing, which is contrasted (e.g., by Brown and Yule, 1983: 234ff), to bottom-up processing. In the latter, meaning is built up from smaller units (letters, words, sentences, etc.) to larger ones (paragraphs, texts, etc.). Top-down processing is related to the idea of schemata considered in the second section. Accountants who are used to reading such letters as these are aware of the contextual features which commonly surround them (someone owes money to someone else, etc.); they are also used to reading

other previous accounts-payable letters; and they make use of this knowledge. No one can be expected to write a text-- any text-- unless they have read (and preferably undertaken some degree of analysis of) another text belonging to the same type. Experienced accountants would, then, more quickly process Text C in a top-down manner than would an outsider who was ignorant of this particular routine of business management.

Text C indicates that in teaching how to write accounts-payable letters, a consideration of individual speech acts is not sufficient. Attention needs to be given to the position of a given sentence in relation to other parts of the text and to what Ferrara (1980) refers to as the master speech act controlling several sentences-- or, as in Text C, an entire text. It is impossible to identify the function of an individual sentence without reference to its position in the co-text (Brown and Yule, 1983: 46). This is similar to Swales' (1990: 53) suggestion that the rationale behind a genre determines the positioning of its parts. Accounts-payable letters would seem to have some of the discourse features Swales ascribes to the genre category of "bad-news" letters. While the main information in a good-news letter is conveyed early (because it is welcome) with incidental details coming later, a bad-news letter requires an initial "buffer" section, which prepares the recipient for the main (unwelcome) information. Several letters considered were structured in this manner, for example:

Text D

> (35) Please be advise that an account 345637 has been set up under Christian Training Center at our CIG Agent in Popondetta - Double Cross Contractors. (36) This is a cash account only and purchases should be CASH ON DELIVERY. (37) Purchase orders will no be accepted under this account.
>
> (38) You are further advised that gas cylinders remain the property of CIG and are supplied to customers on loan. (39) This means cylinders have to be returned back to CIG by the customer after gas is used up.
>
> (40) Furthermore, Rental and Deposit fees are charged on each cylinder deliver to customers.
>
> (41) You have two cylinders on your hand which we did not receive any payment from you.
>
> (42) Please find invoice # 48645 for K49.00 being twelve months rent with statement of account of K49.00. (43) Please pay direct to CIG P/L, P.O. Box 93, Lae.
>
> (44) Could you please send a cheque soon.

In Text D, (35) and (36) provide information about the nature of the relationship existing between Sender and Receiver

(the company and its client). In (37), (38), (39) and (40) general company policies are set out. All of this is background (or "buffer") to the main function of the letter. The relevance of (35) - (40) becomes clear only at (41) which is the first reference to the reason for the specific requests to be made in (43) and (44). In fact (41), because of its position after (35) - (40), takes on a seriousness and significance it would not otherwise possess. Grice's maxim of Relevance is flouted in (35) - (40) in order to uphold a maxim of Leech's Politeness Principle, possibly the Agreement maxim (minimize disagreement). By providing a rational explanation of why the requests in (43) and (44) are being made, the writer hopes to win the agreement of the reader and persuade him to accept the reasonableness of the requests. If Text D were comprised of only (41), (42), (43) and (44) it would certainly uphold the maxim of Manner (be clear), but it would be decidedly impolite. By comparing in this way a text consisting of only those parts required for the master speech act to be performed (requesting the payment due) with the actual text, students were better able to see how and why the maxims of Relevance and Manner are being flouted to uphold a maxim of the Politeness Principle.

The following text provided another example of the pragmatics of discourse organization for discussion:

Text E

(45) You have not settled your Hagen Branch Rental invoices since October 1992 last year.

(46) These invoices are in relation to cylinders that your Hagen Branch are currently holding.

(47) Despite several correspondence with your staff, this account has not been settled.

(48) You are kindly asked to settle payment for this account before end of this month as it is well overdue.
(49) Enclosed please find invoice copies and a copy of statement.

It is the maxim of Quantity (give the right amount of information) that is flouted in (45), (46) and (47). The Receiver of the letter would presumably know this information already; after all s/he is the accountant whose job is to keep a record of invoices received, what they relate to and other correspondence regarding them. On strictly logical grounds we might wonder why s/he is being told what is already known. Many official letters (especially those that bring "bad news") follow a similar strategy: the facts leading up to the request are rehearsed not because the reader is assumed to be unfamiliar with them, but because they provide reasons and justification for making the request. The maxim of Quantity, then, is flouted in order to uphold the Politeness Principle through the maxim of Agreement. By "reminding" the reader of the known facts in this way, the writer hopes to

remove any possible grounds for objection.

The order of information in sentence (48) received special attention by the class. Brown and Levinson (1987: 93f) recognize the importance of organization and ordering in a text for achieving politeness. In fact the examples they give indicate that a failure to come directly to the point can itself be a politeness strategy. Compare the different degrees of politeness in their examples:

A: Goodness, aren't your roses beautiful! I was just coming by to borrow a cup of flour.

B. I was just coming by to borrow a cup of flour. Goodness, aren't your roses beautiful!

Although Brown and Levinson do not explain it in this way, the reason why sequence A is more polite than B (and hence more likely to achieve the intended result) is that A incorporates a greater degree of negative politeness than B. By not coming to the point directly, the Sender of A gives less impression of presuming upon the Receiver or attempting to coerce her/him than does the Sender of B. On the other hand, as (48) from Text E suggests, when the subsidiary information is directly relevant to the main request, it may be considered more polite to place the main request in initial position:

(48) You are kindly asked to settle payment for this account before the end of the month as it is well overdue.

The class agreed that (48), the actual sentence, is probably more polite than (50), another (made-up) possibility:

(50) As your account is well overdue, you are kindly asked to settle payment by the end of the month.

In light of the evidence in Text D, which achieves politeness by placing the subsidiary information initially, in (35) - (41), before the request, it is perhaps surprising that (48) in Text E is perceived to be more polite than (50). Perhaps the reason is that being told the account is overdue is considered a more unpleasant experience than being requested to settle it. This interpretation would support Swales' idea that "bad news" comes last-- or, here, that worse news coming after less worse news-- is more polite than vice versa. These possibilities were discussed but left unresolved by the class. But they did agree that both (48) and (50) were more polite than yet another possibility:

(51) You are kindly asked to settle payment before the end of the month.

The reason why (51), which omits the information about the account being overdue, is less polite than (48) and (50) probably also relates to the Agreement maxim, as discussed above. A sub-

maxim to this might be: provide the Receiver with logical reasons for accepting your request (and thereby minimize his/her reasons for disagreeing).

In a letter that contains a quantity of complex information the positioning of the master speech act can be crucial. As a class exercise one student produced the following letter (in response to a situation suggested by authentic documents supplied by management):

Text F

(52) Prior to your departure for Australia, late last year, Our Port Moresby representative visited your yard to retrieve our cylinders but could not locate them.

(53) Due to the fact that the cylinders were preseumed lost, you are now charged the sum of K200.00, being K100.00 each for two cylinders.

(54) As adviced by our representative, the two cylinders were returned and shipped from Kikori to Port Moresby per M.V. Agutoi, ref. Laurabada Shipping.

(55) However, we have not received any shipping documents from the shipping company concerned and the cylinders have not reached our Port Moresby office.

(56) We therefore suggest that the cylinders are lost and the balance owing to us is payable.

(57) Should you have further queries with regard to this subject, please don't hesitate to call or write me, enclosing necessary shipping documents for reference.

This was considered to be a less successful letter than some of the others, and it gave the class an opportunity to consider why it was perceived in this way. It was also one of the longest letters discussed, containing a great deal of information which had to be condensed and put into narrative form. This was one of the purposes of the assignment: to get the students to use the narrative details as the supporting reason to request payment. The main problem with this text, it seems to me, is the placing of (53) and the reduncancy of (56). (53) interrupts the narrative at an early stage and reaches the conclusion that the cylinders are presumed lost before sufficient supporting information is given. Such justification is, in fact, provided later, in (54) and (55). But jumping the gun and placing (53) before (54) rather than after (55), makes the letter impolite. The writer (student) probably senses the need for the bad news to come after (55) because some of the information in (53) is repeated in (56). It was suggested that to improve the letter the student might eliminate (56) altogether and substitute (53) in its place. This would help to maximize Agreement since the supporting evidence would come before the (indirect) request for outstanding payment is

made.

The reason why (53) is in its present position in Text F may be that the student was unsure about making an appropriate trade-off between the maxim of Manner (be clear) and the Politeness Principle. He may have felt that it was preferable to be clear and come to the point in this case (especially where such a complex amount of detail is involved) than it is to be polite. But the redundancy of (56) may be a vestigial trace of his uncertainty about where to place the master speech act. Again, as with the discussion of (7) at the conclusion of the previous section, students should be encouraged to see their "mistakes" in a positive light. By pointing out that he was engaged in proper pragmatic reasoning but that he may have made an error in chosing one particular discourse strategy over the other, this student may have been encouraged to try and do better next time.

In both theoretical and practical/applied discussions, the fields of Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis, though obviously related, have tended to be kept distinct. Perhaps worse, their advocates sometimes see themselves in warring camps. For instance, when Swales (1990: 18) proposes the primacy of genre by claiming that the need to take into account the order of functions in a text is more fundamental than identifying the functions, is he not perpetuating a rather pointless chicken-and-egg debate? It would be equally legitimate to turn this observation around and claim that a given text can be said to belong to a genre only insofar as its component parts perform particular functions, and in this sense it is the functions that are more fundamental. When confronted with the contingencies and necessities of the classroom, and in particular, the need to teach the practical skills involved in writing such specific text types as accounts-payable letters, Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis should be considered as two sides of the same coin. Grice himself in the careful wording of his Cooperative Principle underscores the importance of text structure when he refers to the contribution being required at the stage at which it occurs-- an emphasis which has been conveniently ignored by some of his Pragmatic followers.

The challenge of developing useful teaching materials and methodologies can lead the way to an important reconsideration of theoretical positions, as can a sensitivity to how language is actually used to communicate in such quotidian worlds as Accounts Departments. In confronting their daily task of trying to recover debts for their company, these students were struggling to strike an appropriate balance between politeness and clarity. In writing their letters, they were engaged equally in developing strategies to perform indirect speech acts and in selecting and organizing information according to the conventions of a particular genre. In monitoring their engagement in the process of negotiating with a Receiver through a written text, it was difficult-- and in the end unnecessary-- to say where one of these activities began and the other ended.

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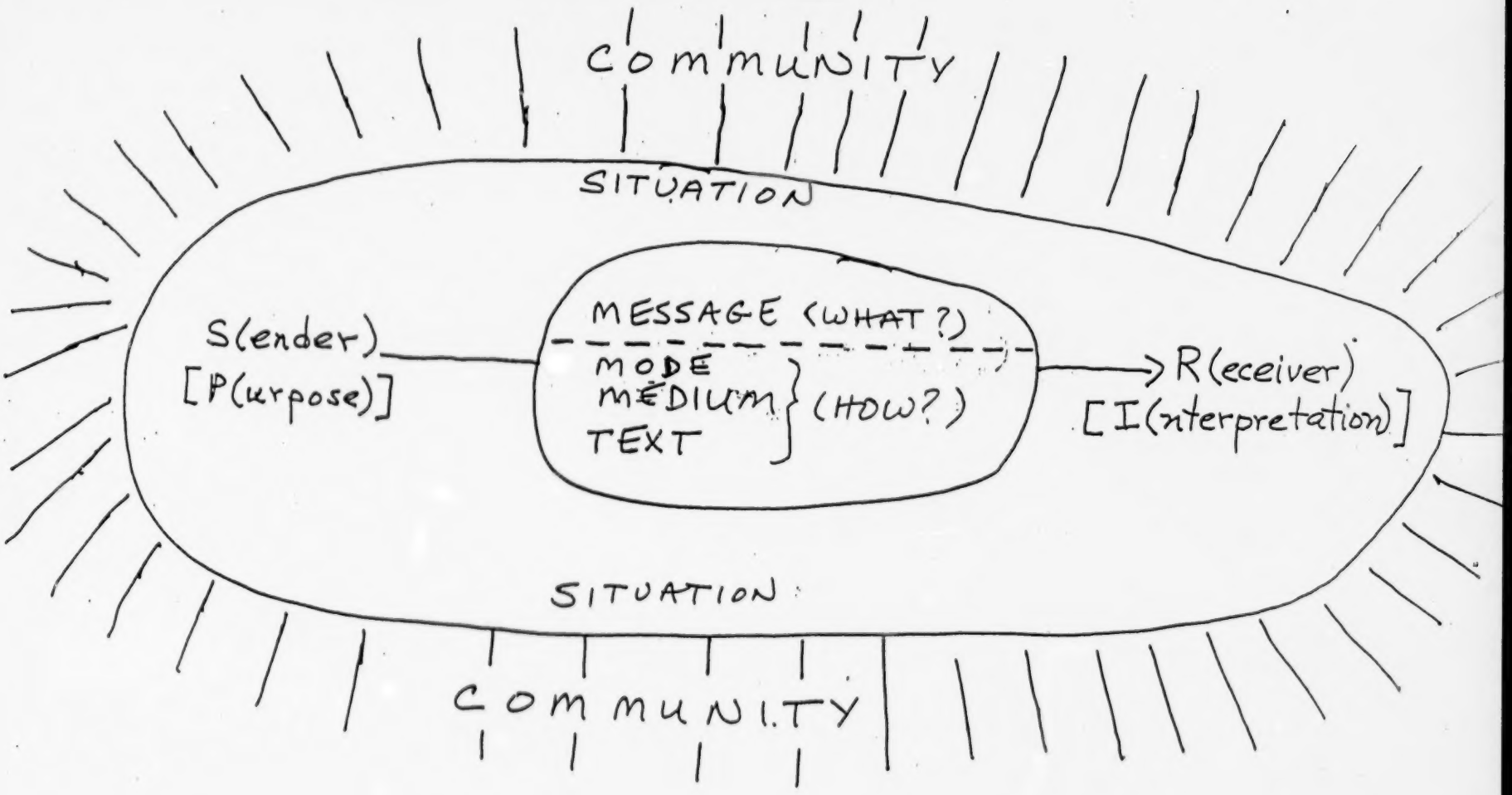
A MODEL FOR COMMUNICATION



Appendix B

EXERCISE ON SOME COMMON FUNCTIONS OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Here is a list of some functions common in business communication.

1. Asking
2. Ordering (i.e., placing an order)
3. Requesting
4. Complaining
5. Instructing
6. Reporting
7. Offering
8. Apologising
9. Granting
10. Refusing

Here are some statements (and parts of statements) that might occur in business communication. For each one, write in the blank space the likely function it performs.

_____ We sincerely regret any inconvenience caused.

_____ Please find enclosed my cheque for the following items.

_____ We wish to inform our customers that each appliance for sale comes with a full year's warranty and that discounts are given for bulk orders.

_____ I regret to inform you that your application has not been successful.

_____ Please inform me whether....

_____ I would like you to ....

_____ It is to be hoped that such negligence does not occur again.

_____ The company has agreed to your request.

_____ The facts of the matter are as follows.

_____ The procedure to follow when placing orders with our sales office is as follows.